“Spirit of the Dead, Rise up!”
— Rewriting the Slavery History through the Palimpsest Historiography in *Sankofa* —

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> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery . . .
>
> —Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother,* 6.

> The discussion of memory in black cultural practice has been interpreted most often through continuist narratives of tradition grounded in the foundational status of Africa. However, it is absolutely necessary to demystify, displace, and weaken the concept of Africa in order to address the discontinuities of history and the complexity of culture practice.
>
> —Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 74.

Introduction: Time traveling

In the recent academic milieu about racial discourse, critics like Michelle Alexander and Saidiya Hartman have pointed out the complex theoretical, historical and political intertwining connections in the history of slavery.[1] By utilizing the term “the afterlife of slavery,” Hartman, for instance, investigates the enduring influence of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery on the black life in the twenty-first century. Hartman attempts to deconstruct the naïve assumption of viewing history as progressive and linear and to reconsider such defining features like loss, dispossession, and grief/moaning as the African diasporic experience.

Time travel has been used as a way for deconstructing such an assumption, reexamining the origins of the historical wounds, and investigating sociopolitical ideologies. Writers like Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Gayl Jones, Fred D’Aguiar, and Octavia Butler and a narrative film like *Sankofa* by Haile Gerima (1993) bring out controversial themes of the transatlantic slave trade through such spatio-temporal migration topics in them and through imaginative writing on slavery, leaving the readers and viewers wondering about the lingering effects of the slavery system in present days.[2] Though transatlantic slavery originated in Africa, its system was principally established in Europe and introduced to America later. Placing characters in the gruesome experiences of slavery and having them undergo the senselessness of past slavery, the time traveling narrative from the unreal viewpoint of a contemporary outsider constitutes a device by which the readers/viewers reconsider the traumatic resonances of the event. Thus, Gerima probes into the dichotomy of past and present, which Anne Donadey and Ashraf Rushdy call “palimpsest narratives,” where “the

present is always written against a background where the past is erased but still legible" (Rushdy 8). For Rushdy, "palimpsest narratives" can be defined as fiction in which present-day African American characters are compelled to "adopt a bitemporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery" (5). In "Postslavery and Postcolonial Representations: Comparative Approaches," Donadey claims that postcolonial writers feel forced to revise and rewrite the past because "the dominant versions of history have left blanks, gaps, and misrepresentations." Thus, these writers, Donadey asserts, overwrite "the palimpsest of historiography, filling out its blanks and responding to its misrepresentations through fiction" (67).

Depicting various historical aspects of slavery, *Sankofa* posits a crucial question of who writes the transatlantic slave history. Moreover, this film delineates the afterlife of slave. As we shall see, in *Sankofa* the protagonist, Mona, who is an African American model, travels to a pre-Civil War plantation. The film begins with Mona, who does a photo shoot at Cape Coast Castle on the West African coast, the place of the "Door of no return" from which Africans were brought into slave ships. She experiences life of the antebellum South, witnesses the past by herself, and provides complicated contemporary views of how to understand history. Shown through the experiences of the traumatic history of their black ancestors, their psychological and physical scars remind them of another unexperienced memory of American history. Then, this film functions as a witness to the lasting violence and trauma of slavery in the lives and minds of the offspring of slaves and the nation as a whole. Answering *Sankofa*'s question of who writes the transatlantic slave history, this paper attempts to bring to the fore the experiences of the enslaved by tracing the process of time traveling and by delineating the narrated afterlife stories of slavery which are traumatically impossible to tell. This is to address the discontinuities of history and "the incommensurability between the experience of the enslaved and the fictions of history."[3] *Sankofa* provides a question of how sites of slavery might both achieve and envision the task of crossing spatio-temporal confines while the living speak with the dead.

1. Haile Gerima's and his motives for *Sankofa*

In an interview with Pamela Woolford (1994), Gerima contends that he is dedicated to having viewers confront the enslaved African legacies of African Americans. For this purpose, he attempts to develop "innovative narrative and aesthetic approaches to his subjects, focusing on creative story structures that enable him to 'tell the trillion untold stories of [his] people' in a counternarrative style that challenges mainstream cinematic forms" (Woolford 90 qtd. by Sheila Petty, 27). Gerima also emphasizes that the film's primary theme involves the critical need to recover and correct history. Criticizing the way slaves are depicted, Gerima states as follows:

> In Hollywood, most slaves are happy. They talk the same. Their identity is fully determined by the context of the plantation. They are nothing. They are property utilized to make the plantation life better, and they have no human dimensions, no desires. And this stereotype does not operate solely against Africans: the experiment began with Native Americans. So, the whole idea of Africans who are happy to be slaves, devoted to their owners, who will sell themselves twenty times over to save their gambling master—all this is the romantic literature of the plantation, the view from the planta-

tion owner's perspective. (Woolford 91, underline mine).

As Angelyn Mitchell notes, "Gerima's film inaugurated a cinematic trend in the 1990s of presenting the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved" (51). Mitchell takes, for instance, *Amistad* (1997) and *Beloved* (1998), while in most films, slavery is narrated from the perspective of the white master and plantation owner. Then, how does *Sankofa* take up more collective forms of remembering and representing American slavery?

Sankofa is a film written, produced, and directed by an Ethiopian-born filmmaker Haile Gerima and was released in 1993, which attempts to utilize slavery to destabilize the past within the African American community and lay bare the multiple meanings and metaphors inscribed on the historic slave castles. In returning to the Black's past, *Sankofa* shares its cinematic motifs with *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Band of Angels* (1957), *Mandingo* (1975), and *Roots* (1977). Yet, for Gerima, *Sankofa* is a conscious rearticulation of filmic representation of American slavery from the dominant narratives of the Hollywood classics *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind*. According to Gerima, "Slavery was a scientific adventure, an attempt by industrialized society to create a robotic or mindless human being, pure labor." Contrary to "the happy slaves" of the exploitive adaptations seen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the pro- slavery historical romance films, "it didn't happen in reality, but it did happen in the plantation school of literature, for example. And it happened in the plantation school of cinema." Gerima attempts to delineate "an African race opposed to this whole idea, by making the history of slavery full of resistance, full of rebellion." He also explains that "Resistance and rebellion—the plantation school of thought believed it was always provoked by outsiders, that Africans were not capable of having that human need."[4] Reflecting on the forgotten, erased, and repressed histories of enslaved African American people, he further asserts that "Blacks have to create monuments, healing symbols, Nat Turners: they have to convey their variety and the truth of their history . . . This presentation of history shouldn't be shy; they shouldn't be afraid."[5]

2. *Sankofa*: Recurring memories of trauma

The first shot captures a slave castle in Elmina, Ghana, and then, after showing the Middle Passage we observe a plantation and a maroon community. Before we meet the protagonist Mona, we see a bird of prey perching in a tree, looking down on the fishermen below in Elmina's community. Sylvie Kandé and Joe Karaganis argue that this sight indicates "the souls of those deported Africans who sought a way back to Guinea" and refers to "those birds that followed the bloody wakes of the slave ships" (129).

Sankofa begins with an ominous recurring voiceover proclaiming, "Lingering spirit of the dead, rise up and possess your bird of passage . . . step out and claim your story." We can hear a drum beating along with a passionate voice praying for the spirit of the dead. Later, it is revealed that the drumming is performed by an African man named Sankofa, the "Divine Drummer," who believes that his drumming will lead back home those who were killed in the terrible African diasporic deportation. This is obviously an admonition to Mona, but it is also an exhortation to the viewers of the film.

Mona appears on the beach, wearing an orange wig. Mona is modeling for a fashion shoot at Cape Coast Castle on the Western shores of Africa and is told by a white American photographer to "be more sexy" and to "give me more sex." They have no interest in what the slave fortress signifies in American

history. Mona, this time in a flowing robe, is surprised to meet an African man called Sankofa. He is so outraged at their disinterest in this historic place and her disrespect for her own past history. Sankofa reprimands Mona and the photographer in an African language that is incomprehensible to both of them. Through subtitles, we viewers can understand what he is claiming (“Back to your past. Return to your source”), yet Mona just laughingly dismisses Sankofa as a lunatic. He cautions them that the white photographer should not be there since the venue is sacred for African people.

When Mona (this time in a more modest clothing) and her photographer restart their photo shoot, they are in a building that looks like a castle. In this scene, they are surrounded by tourists, who learn about the surroundings and the Divine Drummer. Along with them, we also are informed that this location is Cape Coast of Ghana and the castle-like edifice is the slave fortress called “the Cape Coast Castle.” It was through this castle (the infamous “Door of no return”) that Africans were gathered, brought into slave ships, and transported to Europe and America.

When Sankofa reappears in front of Mona and her photographer, he reproaches them for their disrespect for the holly place. He tells them that it was in this fortress that whites abused and disgraced millions of Africans. This time, his anger does not only seem to be directed toward Mona, but also at the entire audience of black people, in that his words can be translated as follows:

> Return to your past! This ground is holy ground. Blood has spilled here before. It was from here that we were bought and sold. To America, to Trinidad, to Jamaica. The white man forcefully snatched away our people. It was genocide. They treated us with contempt. They disgraced us, put us to shame. Go back. It is special ground. If you must be here, be aware. Blood has been spilled here.

Sankofa reprimands Mona and tells her that she should be aware of her origin and must “go back to her source.” Sankofa’s words are drowned out by armed soldiers who are supposed to guard and preserve the fortress as a tourist destination.

The word Sankofa derives from the Akan culture of Ghana, referring to the idea of “Go back and get it.” Sankofa is also associated with the proverb “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.”[6] The character in the film embodies this idea, who continues to admonish Mona and the white photographer to respect the sacred place. As there are descendants of the Akan and other West African tribes who were brought to North American through the slave trade, Sankofa serves as a medium who bridges the past and the present of this tragedy.

Considering the responses from African Americans today, Sankofa’s admonishment toward Mona and her white photographer seems not to be an exaggeration. Elmina, for example, has been designated as a World Heritage Monument by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and has attracted a number of tourists from Europe. On divergent attitudes toward the structures, Coleman A. Jordan notes;

> While local residents would like the castles restored and made attractive to tourists, resident and visiting African Americans “want the castles to be as they see them—a cemetery for the slaves who

died in the dungeons in inhuman conditions." (51)[7]

Because of these ambivalent reactions, these structures have been hotly controversial sites. Some African American tourists could grieve and moan over their ancestors, while some of the local people become astonished to see the "emotional responses" of these black Americans" and regard them as a problem.[8]

After the weird encounters with Sankofa, Mona follows the white tourist group as if to make sure of her own identity. On the tour, the guide talks about how the fortress was governed by the British, the French, and the Portuguese at different eras. Left alone behind the tour, she is suddenly time-traveled back through an out-of-body experience into the sugar cane Lafayette plantation in the Southern United States in the slave era as a house slave named Shola. Mona finds many African slaves in shackles and chains, branded and held captive, looking at her without words. Mona takes on the body of a slave and Shola (Mona) takes over the primary narrative role (first person narrative in voice-over). Since Mona narrates the story, this film takes a form of framed stories that make viewers of this film part of the witness of the history that involves the enslaved Africans resistance against ruthless torture. The viewers undergo everything through Mona's first-person perspective of her inner thoughts.

Thus, Shola/Mona needs to find the past for herself and has to compromise with its complexities by herself. Through the experiences of life on the plantation characterized by the terror of unpredictability, Mona comes to understand history that cannot be seen from historical documents alone. She is a witness to the brutal history of her ancestors, returning to the present time with a view of having looked at history from a new perspective. Her journey into the past provides her and the viewers with lived experiences to come to terms with the past memories.

Mona gets panicked and tries to run away for help, only to be seized by white men and to become one of them. Shockingly enough, after she is caught, shackled, and disrobed, they brand Mona's bare back with a red-hot iron as a slave, with her screaming "You're making a mistake. Stop. I'm not an African . . . don't you recognize me? I'm Mona. I'm an American!" Mona's terrified proclamation—"I'm not an African. I'm an American"—reveals that even those blacks consider themselves to be simply Americans, not black Americans or African Americans, in the film's narrative logic.[9]

As Mona cries in terror, her aggrieved voice mixes with a recording song of Aretha Franklin, a soulful rendition of the hymn "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." She is physically and sexually abused as an African slave. Through the horrific experiences of Mona, we viewers are dragged into being the spectators of slavery with Mona and are forced to go through many mental and physical crimes committed against slaves (Kara Keeling interprets this scene as "Christ's crucifixion—a deftly orchestrated metaphor of Mona's martyrdom"). We also witness how they were abused and tortured by their white owners and how the enslaved had to come to terms with their depressed and enraged feelings. Her suffering signifies ones by "those black who, like her, have lost their way and become Westernized" (Keeling 56).

When she is seen gathering with the plotters, she is whipped, raped, and humiliated to "renounce African deities and proclaim her belief in Catholic dogma, as a result of which she joins the rebellion" (Acevedo-Munoz 175). Placed in the center of the frame, Shola is humiliatingly stripped on her knees with her hands tied together by a hefty rope. As Sheila Petty indicates, this scene is symbolic of the "societal pressures of slave owner and religion": "Shola's entrapment is heightened by Lafayette towering over her

on the right holding a knife and Father Raphael leaning in on the left with a bible and crucifix in his hands" (45). The humiliation of Shola/Mona represents the disposed people's memories of being beaten, raped, and deprived of all human rights. The viewers are supposed to be the witnesses to some of the most dreadful aspects of American repressed history.

Eventually, Mona is transported back to the present day and comes out of the museum with her vivid experiences of having suffered the life of her enslaved ancestors on a sugar cane plantation. While at the beginning of the film Mona has no respect and knowledge about her own past, the new Mona's past memories continue to haunt her and she becomes a witness of the horrors of slavery and its related racism. As she takes part in a spiritual session at the castle grounds in which she respects her ancestors who went through diasporic experiences, the film has Mona going through a collective bondage process through which she alters her perception of herself and her own tribe. Moreover, through the experience of time-traveling, Mona sees the lingering influences of slavery in modern society and finally comes to understand that what Sankofa, the guardian of the castle, is attempting to do is to have slave descendants see the everlasting importance of the recognition of slavery. She walks into a group of black people who also know what Sankofa actually means and about their own roots. At the end of the film, we see Nunu reappear out of the slave castle and shed tears of joy.

3. Multiplicity of Africa

Through the time traveling narrative, Gerima showcases how the brutal trauma of slavery as a personal and intimate affair continues to have tremendous effects on society, especially in terms of regarding the black body as an otherized corporeal object. Homi Bhabha articulates that "[The problem] is not Self and Other, but the Otherness of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (xv).[10] Because of the hegemonic inscriptions, an individual comes to perceive the self as a stranger (an Otherized corporeal object), not as a familiar object. For Bhabha, "the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (44–45).[11] As Jackson II contends, "[s]ince the body is a discursive text whose meaning is concretized through communicative practices, fantasies that are behaviorally confirmed are treated as powerfully real, and often result in real fears, anxieties, and insecurities."[12] This can be exemplified in the film where Mona is forced to be naked and branded, while Shola is forced to be lashed and humiliated. Their suffering makes us readers/viewers reevaluate "their identities, illusory beliefs, and the Eurocentric history that underpins both" (Petty 46).

In *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalization*, Ruth Mayer maintains that against essentialist definitions of identity, Africa is an artificial entity. Its images have been invented and preserved by colonialism. In the discussion of *Sankofa*, Mayer highlights the methodological importance of Gerima's film.

> Gerima's very emphasis on the diasporic condition—the interaction of Africans, African-Americans, and Caribbean slaves, and his virtual exclusion of white protagonists—points to a shift of interest, leading from social critique and political protest to a historical and anthropological probing into the possibility of diasporic self-fashioning against the diatribes of racism. (237–38)

As Mayer suggests, when *Sankofa* depicts the African Diasporic experiences, it intertwines them with Africa. Heike Raphael-Hernandez also points out the same point that "[t]he film's novelty is offered in its insistence in connecting the past with the present, the diaspora with its home, so that healing and reconciliation can begin" (243).

3. Critical fabulation and palimpsest narratives

Gerima recognizes the assumption that there is no perfectly remembering and absolutely forgetting the past. It would be almost impossible for the peoples of African descent in the diaspora to live a life with the memories of the painful events of slavery ever-present. Hence, there is a need to strike a balance between remembrance and forgetfulness. This is why we need to base our discussion in such following frames of reference as "critical fabulation" and "palimpsest narratives."

Even though the principle topic of *Sankofa* is racism, the issue of racism is not shown in a monolithic way. Some people in Ghana become envious of the African American tourists and they wish their Ghanaian ancestors could have been taken to America as slaves in order that their offspring could avoid harsh living conditions in Africa. Given these facts, in writing and narrating a history of violence, how can one surpass or problematize the limits of the archive?

It is Saidiya Hartman who theorizes a writing methodology of "critical fabulation" as a reaction against the "violence of the archive," where voices, memories, and histories of the marginalized people are ideologically absented, omitted, and excluded as an agency of power. Critical fabulation practiced in the narrative of time traveling, through acts of imagination, allows one to reimagine histories that you cannot find in the archive and to reveal subjugated knowledge as one can see in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (the terror of slavery is always a haunting presence). It signifies a combination of historical and archival research method and attempts to cast light on the gaps and silences in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery constellation. Therefore, what Gerima weaves through in *Sankofa* is "not a seamless narrative, not a seamless memory." It signifies "a broken memory, but one that persists" and "is not a matter of re-creating a totalizing, mythologizing narrative . . . but a matter of rewriting her story by paying attention to the parts of the story that remain alive in others' memories" (Donadey 75).

Through "the site of memory" and "the sight of memory," *Sankofa* as an archive of slave history visualizes a "return to and engagement with painful places, worlds where black people were denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship."[13] If *Sankofa* as a film functions as a kind of archive of slavery, it is the violence that "determines, regulates, and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power." Thus, this paper attempts to foreground the experiences of the enslaved by tracking the process of time traveling and by tracing the narrated stories which are traumatically impossible to tell. This is to expose "the incommensurability between the experience of the enslaved and the fictions of history."[14]

What dynamics are there in representing past and present moments in such an archive? One needs to practice a critical reading of the archive that focuses on the figurative dimension of history, which attempts to uncover as full views about the lives, histories, and memories of the captives as possible. The style of time traveling enables one to produce a series of speculative arguments and to amplify the capacities of the erased and silenced subjunctive in fashioning narratives.[15] Like Morrison, Hartman emphasizes the impor-

tance of studying transatlantic slavery through critical fabulation.

> Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing . . . a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. ("Venus" 11)

And then, she adds that "[b]y playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view," one can destabilize the hierarchy of discourse and deconstruct "the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done." Moreover, by questioning "'what happened when' and by exploiting the 'transparency of sources' as fictions of history," one can clarify "the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history)." To this end, Hartman insists "[n]arrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity."[16]

As to this "past conditional temporality of 'what could have been,'" Lisa Lowe writes;

> The *past conditional temporality* of the "what could have been" symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods. (40–41)[17]

What Hartman and Lowe share is the theorization of loss and erasure (the exact articulation of "what could have been" from loss). This act labors to delineate the lives of the enslaved captives and to submerge authorized narrative in the clash of unclaimed voices. Through this method, one can patch together present, past, and future in renarrating the stories of the enslaved and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.[18]

Like Hartman, the purpose of this rendition is "not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance." The study of time traveling narrative invokes "a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive." Time traveling makes it possible to attend to the archive's silence and reactivate it omissions and erasures. The stories of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved revealed in *Sankofa* are part of the irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade, which "we cannot now and will never be recovered."[19]

In recounting the story of what happened at Cape Coast, this paper attempts to show the incommensurable aspects between the "prevailing discourses and the event," the inevitable failure of any attempt to fully represent the suffering of the enslaved. In doing so, this paper highlights "the instability and discrepancy of the archive" (the promiscuity of the archive"), presenting "a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical". Though *Sankofa* cannot provide a definite black counter history (those accounts of the subaltern can be only regarded as "insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed"), it

is because of this failure to fully represent the past memories that amplify the necessity of retelling the past stories.[20]

Built on the discussion by Michel de Certeau about how a narrative of defeat can create a place for the living or envisage an alternative future, Hartman writes about the two ways in which historiography operates in depicting death:

> [T]here are at least two ways the historiographical operation can make a place for the living: one is attending to and recruiting the past for the sake of the living, establishing who we are in relation to who we have been; and the second entails interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past. ("Venus" 14)

In the case of time traveling, we readers and viewers are always left to embrace "likely failure" to represent a history of an unrecuperable past and are supposed to accept the "ongoing, unfinished and provisional" nature of this process. However, along with the characters who travel from the 20th century to the 19th century, we also embrace "a sense of incompleteness" and a recognition that "some part of the self is missing" after the time traveling. Therefore, this act is to create "a history written with and against the archive" (Hartman 12–14). It attempts to reconstruct the past and reinstall the "lived" experiences of the enslaved as history in the form of rebellious, subversive, and disruptive narrative.

4. The Afterlife of Slavery

Based on the notion of "afterlife of slavery," Hartman tracks the lingering precarious presence of the racialized violence of slavery in the present time. She delineates slavery's effects on all parts of society which are historically archived as a bridge between past and present. In her *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Hartman clarifies the process as follows:

> I wanted to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance. Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (6–7, underline mine)

The slave past and the afterlife of slavery in the contemporary time can be annexed through our investigation of past histories, even through delving into "unverifiable truths" that could otherwise stay inaccessible.

Another touchstone for my argument is the idea of historical materialism by Walter Benjamin. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he contends that history should not be considered to be a teleologically driven linear chronology but rather as an elliptical process. He writes that readers should not "apprehend history as a series of causal events that proceed logically, one from the other, but rather as a

constellation in which past and present are enmeshed and the future necessarily ensnared."[21] Benjamin claims that compared to a traditional historian or historicist who naively believes in a form of historical narration as linear progress, a "historical materialist" sees "the possibility of glimpsing failed futures, recognizing unredeemable pasts, and apprehending retrograde outcomes 'in the time of the now' opens wide" (Alys Eve Weinbaum 114). The fragmented pasts, presents, and futures are not installed as authorized history. Benjamin defines this as "the presence of the now" where history is not seen as "homogeneous, empty time" but as "time filled by the presence of the now," a kind of "here-and-now" in which past and present intersect (252–53). He continues as follows:

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It becomes historical posthumously . . . A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as 'the time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (263)

Thus, Benjamin accuses historicism of causality where two events are connected by a simple bond of cause and effect in a linear history and which imposes on history the model of mechanical causality. Rather, the instability of history itself prevents historians from seeing it as a succession of cause and effect. This model constitutes "a new type of historical intelligibility," basing itself not "on a scientific model of knowledge, designed to reveal the *laws* of historical process, but on a *hermeneutic* model, tending to the *interpretation* of events, that is, toward illuminating their *meaning*" (Stéphane Mosès 113, emphasis original). In this frame of reference, the present galvanizes the past and stimulates the forgotten or repressed meanings it endures, while "opposing forces and discourses are constantly struggling for dominance, potential revolution continually struggling against oppression and exploitation" (Dino Franco Felluga 137).

This version of history takes as its mission the analyses of the way hegemonic and dominant forces in a culture of a given period attempt to marginalize and subjugate the oppressed like slaves. By the narrative of time traveling, one can find the residual and emergent forces in a counter hegemonic formation of a new narrative. Fredric Jameson explains this as follows:

> History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis which its "ruses" turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force. This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them. (102)

Like Hartman, Benjamin, and Jameson's philosophy of history, *Sankofa* seeks to crystallize the present with the past and "in recognizing the importance of constellation for the project of redeeming the past in present, for a future yet to come" (Weinbaum 114).

5. Africans in *Sankofa*

One of the film's overarching theme is Sankofa—don't forget your roots and look toward the future. As is embodied and symbolized by the character Sankofa chanting the phrase "Lingering spirit of the dead, rise up," this recurrent theme is also seen in Mona's transportation from the modern day to the antebellum past, and her accompanying transformation from timid to brave in her personality. In the body of Shola as a slave, she transforms herself from a timid and rather compliant slave to a bravely rebellious one. At the beginning of the story, Shola tells Shango to stay away from trouble that could get him whipped and beaten. Even at times when she is raped by one of the slave masters, she is just lost for words and does not fight back. When she encounters meetings by her fellow slaves, she keeps her distance and does not try to participate in them. She just stays in her shell as a slave and does not attempt to change the reality.

In *Sankofa*, it is Shola's friend Shango's healing (who is "another one of the plotters with knowledge of medicinal plants and traditional prayers") that brings about "Shola's final cultural and spiritual liberation."[22] While Shola dejectedly cries, Shango tells her:

> Go on Shola, run . . . . We're not going slave no more, just go on running. Shola, I did have a little sister who ate mud and dead. And up to this date I couldn't understand which part she go. I could only see her body. Then, long after, my father go dead and that is the time I get more confused; I couldn't really understand what did really go on. You know, my father dead ... my sister dead, all I could see was them body . . . . I realize this was a kind of different thing .... I had a friend name Jake. He was the first one tell me 'bout people like me who live up in the hills like normal human beings . . . We use to sit down and plan up our escape. One morning I wake up and I see Jake hang from a tree. That was the time when I realize say be better if I dead ... because if I dead, I'd only go to the people who I love: my father, my sister, and Jake.[23]

Thus, Shango, another brave man in the story, emphasizes that he is not afraid of death any more after Jake's hanging. Shola's transformation occurs when she receives a hand-carved pendant/talisman, passed down to him from his father, in the shape of the Sankofa bird from Shango.

As the voice over of Shola explains, as soon as Shola becomes an intrepid rebel, she tries to run away from the plantation but gets captured and whipped instead. The three figures—Master James, Father Rafael, head slave Joe, who symbolize the colonial domination during slavery—conduct this punishment to expel the heathen traits out of her. After getting the Sankofa bird, she is more defiant and starts actively participating in resistance meetings.[24] Just as the bird's implication suggests, she never forgets the past but looks further into the future. Especially after Nunu's death, she realizes and appreciates her sacrifices. The climax of her defiance comes when she finally murders her white rapist (the plantation owner's son) and attempts to escape from the plantation as Shango instructed her before (though she eventually dies after running away; this takes her back to the present time as Mona). Through the dehumanizing experience of the abused slave as Shola, Mona listens well to the African drummer Sankofa and becomes a solid witness to the roots of her ancestry.

Another major theme depicted in *Sankofa* is a moral and ethical conflict faced by a mixed-blood

character Joe, betrayal and faithfulness among the enslaved.[25] As Noah Bertlatsky points out, *Sankofa* is "remarkably focused, even obsessed, with betrayal and faithfulness." Taking Nunu's son Joe (also known as Tumey) for example, he is the slave overseer and a light skinned and completely denies his African identity. The fact that he has two names indicates his split identities: Joe is the name given by his white master while Tumey is the name assigned to him by his mother and the other slaves. He seems to live an easier life as a result of turning on his own people and even his own mother.

His birth as a result of the rape of his mother on a slave ship by a white master symbolizes his racial presence of in-betweeness, which reflects on his unwilling betrayal of the displaced African people from their own culture and heritage. At one time, Joe is placed in a difficult situation, when he is asked by his master James to beat the runaway slaves to discipline other slaves. Even though Joe is literate and can count, James mocks him asking if he is illiterate and cannot count and whip.

Nowhere is his ambivalence toward his belonging and racial identity more clearly revealed than in the contrast between Joe and his mother Nunu. In other words, it is in the characterization of Joe that the insidious nature of Western imperial ideology through Christianity most clearly can be exposed. His mother is a leader of the resistance and utilizes her knowledge of African customs and religion as a source of rebellion. She is referred to as "heathen Guinea woman" by the plantation priest (Father Raphael), represents dark unenlightened precolonial Africa with its "traditional religions, rites, secrecy, mysticism and unfathomable, incomprehensible languages" (Samba Diop 62). Father Raphael instils into Joe that the Africans on the plantation worship the devil. Therefore, Joe cannot identify himself with them and rejects Africa and his mother, and feel more bonded with the priest Father Raphael. He is a blue-eyed self-proclaimed devout Christian and worships and cherishes a picture of the Virgin Mary.[26] As Joe is emotionally detached from his mother and other enslaved Africans, he does not become angry or riled when the priest denounces his mother and uses abusive words toward her in Joe's confession at church. Father Raphael orders Joe to pray harder to avoid Nunu. What Joe resorts to is his strong belief in the Virgin Mary to erase doubts and hesitation. Diop notes that this attitude of Joe derives from his racial position as mixed ("the offspring of the rapist white master and as such, does not know his father" 62). In the end, he subsequently ends up killing his own mother Nunu after being persuaded that his mother is possessed (in fact, she was engaged in a religious ritual of invocation). Thus, he is the very embodiment of a tortured sense of identity.

After his mother is dead, Joe comes to hold strong remorse with his own deeds and as a will of resistance brings her body into the church against the church's strict rules of the access of black bodies to its sites. We are told that Nunu's spirit is believed to have returned to Africa on the wings of the legendary Sankofa bird with her deep desire to fly back to her home thus fulfilled.[27] Through the representations of Joe, one can see how Africans themselves are active participants in the slavey system.

In stark contrast, at end of the scene we see Shango, who symbolizes the antithesis of slavery, rebellious and free. His Caribbean language, which is an Africanized English language, is symbolic of this rebellion. Shango gives the Sankofa bird to Shola, and in a sense, gives her the rebellious attitude of which he already possesses. Shango is a maroon slave who was bought in the West Indies and taken to the Lafayette plantation − a faithful and rebellious character passionately seeking freedom and who exhibits unwavering devotion to his people. Shango is indicative of the way his tribe should pursue as a rebellion against the dominant. He speaks a Caribbean language (an Africanized English), which also indicates the dismantle-

ment of the dominant discourse. He gives the Sankofa bird to Shola and inspires her to follow the spirit of rebellion via it.

Thus, *Sankofa* does not only idolize the past histories of the enslaved without dark aspects but it also attempts to reconstruct various ways the diaspora reacted toward the oppressive forces. At the end of the film, as Shola flees from the plantation and gets caught, we can hear her fantastical narration in which she dodges her captors and flies back to Africa. In this process, the camera intertwines such symbolic places of transatlantic slave trade as the cane fields, the Atlantic Ocean, and finally Cape Coast Castle.[28] Thus, the presence of the slave fort, Cape Coast Castle constitutes "a cinematic monument for post-civil rights African Americans." While at first the castle embodies "a site of fragmentation and loss," finally in the film, "the fort symbolizes the spiritual plentitude and diasporic wholeness of 'Africa.'" In *Sankofa*, as Salamishah Tillet highlights, "Cape Coast Castle undergoes a hermeneutical transfiguration from a locus of oppression to a site of belonging and racial reunification" (121). Moreover, through a flash-forward to the present day, Mona joins numerous tribes of African diasporas ("whose clothing, hairstyles, and skin complexions suggest they come from varied places in the African diaspora" (ibid). Through efforts to reinstall a past that can unfold another collective identity, the film provides a different way of identification.

One must not forget the contradictions and criticism Tillet finds and provides in her discussion of heritage tourism; "the clash of desires of African Americans to imagine a transnational diasporic identity and also to see these slave forts as sites of an American past which thus offer ways of entering into US national belonging." This is because such heritage tourism to the slave forts tends to harvest "a visual rhetoric that results in a displacement of contemporary Ghana and Senegal" (128).

Conclusion:

Gerima created *Sankofa* almost thirty years ago, yet the outlook Gerima demonstrates is still significant in modern society. In the everyday reality of the African-American community, the nefarious impacts of slavery and many remnants of it can still be prevalent.

As is delineated in the film, *Sankofa* aptly deals with a controversial theme of the transatlantic slave trade through such spatio-temporal migration topics in them. Time travel has been used as a way for deconstructing such an assumption, reexamining the origins of the historical wounds, and investigating sociopolitical ideologies. The method leaves the readers and viewers wondering about the lingering effects of the slavery system in present days. Placing characters in the gruesome experiences of slavery and having them undergo the senselessness of past slavery, the time traveling narrative from the unreal viewpoint of a contemporary outsider constitutes a device by which the readers/viewers reconsider the traumatic resonances of the event.

In order to clarify this point, this paper bases its argument on Saidiya Hartman's attempt to deconstruct the naïve assumption of viewing history as progressive and linear and to refocus such defining features like loss, dispossession, and grief/moaning as the African diasporic experience. Critical fabulation practiced in the narrative of time traveling, through acts of imagination, enables one to revision histories that you cannot find in the archive and to reveal subjugated knowledge as one can see in the fact that the terror of slavery is always a haunting presence. It signifies a combination of historical and archival research method and attempts to cast light on the gaps and silences in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery constellation.

Thus, this paper attempts to foreground the experiences of the enslaved by tracking the process of time traveling and by tracing the narrated stories which are traumatically impossible to tell. This is to expose "the incommensurability between the experience of the enslaved and the fictions of history."

Sankofa presents various aspects of afterlives of African Americans, including rebellious and resistant enslaved Africans, purporting to revise or fill in the gaps and erasures of prevailing historical narratives. In recounting the story of what happened at Cape Coast, this paper attempts to show the incommensurable aspects between the "prevailing discourses and the event," the inevitable failure of any attempt to fully represent the suffering of the enslaved. In doing so, this paper highlights "the instability and discrepancy of the archive" (the promiscuity of the archive"), presenting a counter history at the juncture of the fictive and the historical. Though *Sankofa* cannot provide a definite black counter history (those accounts of the subaltern can be only regarded as "insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed"), it is because of this failure to fully represent the past memories that amplify the necessity of retelling the past stories.

This paper needs to investigate more the socio-historical context in which this heritage tourism is conducted, to consider the effects of slavery in the wider context of post–civil rights African-American heritage tourism and African-American demands for reparations from slavery.[29] By tracing more residues of the history of slavery, one can further analyze the assumptions of critics or activists who make the haunting ghosts of slavery implicit or explicit in that slavery upholds a haunting occult presence, "nowhere but nevertheless everywhere."[30]

[Notes]

1 This work is supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) [19K00460]. From the perspective of law, legal scholar Michelle Alexander reconsiders the lingering legal discrimination against black people even after the abolition of Jim Crow law and the exaggerated celebration of the election of Barack Obama as a symbol of America's "triumph over race."

2 The form of time traveling belongs to the genre science fiction, and its overarching notion is "Afrofuturism." Combining various disciplines, the term Afrofuturism has a new configuration among people of African descent. In an essay titled "Black to the Future," Mark Dery explains the meaning of Afrofuturism;

> African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called "Afrofuturism." The notion . . . gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? (736)

As has been pointed out by André M. Carrington, when he "invokes the discursive eradication of the African American past as a potential obstacle to the emergence of Afrofuturism, he is rehearsing the narrative that gave us the term futurism in the first place" (23). He has won many national film awards and his other films are *Bush Mama*, *Imperfect Journey*, *Adwa*, and *Teza*.

3 Hartman, "Venus," 10.

4 Woolford, "Filming Slavery," 92.

5 Ibid, 102.

6 "African Tradition, Proverbs, and Sankofa."

7 I referred to Edward M. Bruner, 292. See also Kevin Gaines on this point.
8 Jordan, 51. See also Bruner, 296.
9 I referred to Keeling 56.
10 Bhabha, xv.
11 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.
12 Though the book's focus lies in "masculinity," the theory is well applicable to the discussion of gender as a whole. See Ronald L. Jackson II.
13 McKittrick 11.
14 Hartman, "Venus," 10.
15 I referred to Hartman for this argument, 11.
16 Hartman, "Venus," 11–12.
17 Lisa Lowe, 208.
18 I referred to Hartman, "Venus," 12.
19 Ibid.
20 Hartman, "Venus," 12–13.
21 Weinbaum, 114. See also Walter Benjamin, 263.
22 I referred to Acevedo-Munoz, 175.
23 Acevedo-Munoz also quotes this part, 175.
24 Master James is the slave owner and master of the house. He is a hypocrite and wrongly exploits Christian values black slaves to make profits.
25 Berlatsky states "Joe, with his divided loyalties, staggers about casting mournful glances this way and that while committing various atrocities almost despite himself."
26 When having sex with Lucy (a house slave cook), his eyes are transfixed on a picture of Virgin Mary with by Jesus on the wall. As the scene is accompanied by his confession to Father Raphael about his sin and guilt. He is a character who lacks his gender masculine identity and is mocked as "Bible boy" because he is considered to be divergent to the day's gender norms.
27 I referred to Najrin Islam, 497–99, especially 498.
28 Also one cannot forget the fact that these edifices ironically can be "a commodity which can be marketed to the public." For this, I referred to Jordan. See also Kankpeyeng and DeCorse, 91.
29 Tillet, for instance, investigates the way in which African Americans have reacted to the experience of post-civil rights civic estrangement "because they have been marginalized or underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creeds, and images of the past that constitute, reproduce, and promote an American national identity" (3). An African-American exceptionalist fantasy of diasporic solidarity with Africa, she argues, allows African Americans to "reframe the language of belonging in the transnational discourse of the African diaspora" and to "challenge the racial authority of American civic myths and national memory." Yet, "travel to Africa to see sites of slavery risks rendering 'Africa' to be only a site of slavery" (127).
30 David Marriot, xxi.

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